

bridges



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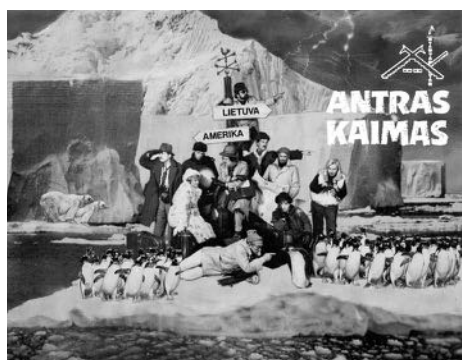
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bridges

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EDITOR
Karilė Vaitkutė

ART DIRECTOR
Daniel P. Craig, Jr.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, CURRENT EVENTS
Alan J. Stankus, P.E. (ret)

ADVERTISING & SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER
Marius Naris

Editorial Office
139 Willow Blvd., Willow Springs, IL 60480
kariledalia@yahoo.com

Subscriber Services and Advertising
spauda@javlb.org

Facebook
facebook.com/BridgesLithuanianAmericanMagazine



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LAC, INC. NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BOARD
14911 127th Street, Lemont, IL 60439
finansai@javlb.org

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from the editor

Dear readers,

The year is coming to an end. Traditionally, we tend to look back and reminisce on the events that happened during the past twelve months. 2020 has been an exceptionally worrisome and difficult year for many, if not for everyone. For some, it was a truly tragic year. The events of the past year, from a deadly pandemic to the movement for racial injustice, did touch the lives of Lithuanian Americans as well. Due to coronavirus and pandemic, we had to undergo many changes. Coincidentally, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus a pandemic on March 11th. On that day, Lithuanians all over the world celebrated the 30th anniversary of Lithuania's independence, and after that, most events planned by the Lithuanian American Community had to be canceled. We had to postpone the Lithuanian Dance Festival and the Lithuanian Song Festival. We had to close our schools and to stop the activities of many of our organizations. However, the LAC continued its meetings and some events via Zoom; several new projects were implemented, including the launch of a new website for all the Lithuanian American events, www.renginiai.javlb.org. If you would like to enter your event on this calendar, please write to kultura@javlb.org.

2020 was the year of many tests. We had a chance to see how strong and at the same time how vulnerable we are as people, as citizens, and as a community. It was a year of many clashes, quarrels, arguments, and fights. And it's fine. Democracy feeds on argument. As long as we are willing to fight for our freedom and our rights. As long as we are willing to express our stand by showing up and voting.

It was very encouraging to see so many people ready to help and helping in the time of need, be it delivering food to senior citizens, caring for the sick, collecting funds for those affected by unemployment, or consoling families after losing a loved one. During the past year, Bridges was filled with stories of suffering but also with stories of strength, perseverance, and empathy.

I truly hope that the next year is going to be a brighter and better one. It might not be an easy one after the devastating effects on our economy and our physical and mental health. However, I truly believe that eventually, it will get better. I wish everyone peace and strength.

Karilė Vaitkutė
Editor

The First 25 Years of Bridges. 1976-2001

Algimantas S. Gečys



Algimantas S. Gečys, President of the LAC VIII National Executive Committee.

This is an abridged and loosely translated version of an article by Algimantas S. Gečys, which was published in 2003 in a book titled "JAV LB Penki dešimtmečiai. 1951-2002" (The Five Decades of the LAC. 1951-2002). The publishing of this book was another of his achievements during the many years he worked with and for the Lithuanian American Community.

I present this abridged translated version of the article to mark the first anniversary of the passing of Algimantas S. Gečys (12-6-2019), a man who inspired and originated Bridges. I hope his memory and his efforts will inspire future LAC activists to continue the mission of Bridges. In 2004, Jeanne Šalna-Dorr became the editor of Bridges with Gema Kreivėnas as the magazine's graphic artist. Jeanne was followed by Teresė Vekteris and currently Karilė Vaitkutė.

-- Teresė M. Gečys (Gečienė)

In 1976, before the newly elected Council of the Lithuanian American Community gathered for its first meeting, I, as national president of the LAC, called a meeting of the LAC National Executive Committee. One of the very first items on the agenda was the establishment of an English language magazine (journal) to reach English speaking people with Lithuanian roots, acquaint them with the LAC organization, and inform them with articles about Lithuanian history and culture. I presented this idea with some degree of trepidation that not everyone might welcome my suggestion. To my great surprise, not one person dissented, and all were very supportive.

By 2003 at the writing of this article, there were already a number of LAC chapters that use both English and Lithuanian for their organizational and cultural Lithuanian activities.

The name Bridges (Tiltai) was suggested by Dr. Algirdas Budreckis, vice-president of the LAC National Executive Committee, who agreed to become the first editor of the new journal. Dr. Budreckis was an American born in a family of "first wavers." He belonged to and was active in many Lithuanian organizations in the US. He knew Lithuanian history and was perfectly fluent in the Lithuanian language. Most importantly, he personally knew many Lithuanian Americans of every generation.

In his very first editorial in the first issue in April 1977, Budreckis summarized his outreach goals. The most important was restoring the connection of "mobile" Lithuanian Americans who had drifted away from Lithuanian communities. The first issue of Bridges was only 8-pages long, with several short articles, a number of brief facts about Lithuania, and current Lithuanian news items.

As years passed by, Bridges grew to 28 and sometimes more pages. After Dr. Budreckis, there were many more editors – Rimantas Stirbys, Dr. Stasys

Goštautas, Demie Jonaitienė, Eduardas V. Meilus, Juozas Arlauskas, Audronė Gulbinienė, Asta Banionytė, Diana Vidutienė, also Nerija Gureckaitė, Linas Norušis, and others helped in-between editors. At the writing of this article, from 1988 till 2003, Rasa Ardytė-Juškienė took on the task of editing Bridges. She was recognized for her long service on September 21, 2002, during the annual meeting of the National Council of the Lithuanian American Community. Also, honorably mentioned were all the other editors and assistants as well as donors aiding the publication of Bridges.

Turning the pages of Bridges, it becomes obvious that this journal managed to avoid any personal innuendos or insulting opinions in published articles. After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, Bridges was the purveyor of not only Lithuanian traditions and values to Lithuanian Americans, but also the explainer of Lithuania's goals to members of United States Congress. During the years of Sąjūdis when Lithuania was fighting for separation from the Soviet Union and during the start of recovery when Lithuania again became a sovereign and independent country, Bridges was distributed to the staff of all 535 members of Congress. Over 4000 copies were published. During the first ten years, the main goal was to raise pride in Lithuanian heritage. After 1991, the magazine turned to defending the goals of independent Lithuania and supporting its efforts to join NATO and the European Union. As years passed by, the pages of Bridges were filling with pictures of Lithuanian orphans, Lithuanian schools, and other scenes of Lithuania in need of our assistance. Especially touching were articles written by Jeanne Šalna-Dorr about Lithuanian orphans. Thousands of dollars were raised through Bridges articles for the charitable foundations under the umbrella of the Lithuanian American Community Social Services Council.

It is not clear how long Bridges will survive. All ethnic groups are experiencing financial difficulties with their printed media. Bridges and others are competing with colorful, beautifully edited publications of independent Lithuania. However difficult, we do need to carry on and continue the bridge connecting generations seeking to find their roots and their heritage. I am convinced that Dr. Algirdas Budreckis, who passed into eternity much too soon, would wish for Bridges to continue its mission.

To mark the first anniversary of the passing of Algimantas S. Gečys, we present a collage of photos sent by Lithuania's Honorary Consul in New York Rimas Česonis. These photos testify to the important work Algimantas S. Gečys did for the Lithuanian American Community and Lithuania.

Algimantas S. Gečys was born in 1933 in Kaunas, Lithuania. He and his parents left Lithuania in 1944. His family lived in a DP camp in Hanau, Germany, where Algimantas attended high school. In 1949, the Gečys family immigrated to the United States of America. Algimantas graduated from the Drexel Institute of Technology in Philadelphia in 1967. From 1967 to 1988, he worked for The Budd Company, a car and train company, and from 1989 to 1999, he worked as chief engineer for the US Treasury Department Mint Division.

Throughout his lifetime, Algimantas worked for the benefit of Lithuania, seeking its liberation. From 1956 to 1958, he was an active member of the Lithuanian student Ateitininkai organization. From 1957 to 1963, Algimantas served as Chairman of the Philadelphia Baltic Committee. His work for the Lithuanian American Community involved serving as Vice President of the Lithuanian American Community (1971-1973), Chairman of the Council for Public Affairs (1974-1976, 1979-1981, and 1991-1994), President of the Lithuanian American Community (1976-1979, 1985-1986, and 2001-2003.) He was also active in the work of the World Lithuanian Community by serving as its Vice President from 1981 to 1984. From 1988 to 1992, he worked as a representative of Lithuanian Americans of Pennsylvania, mediating between the administration of the state governor and the Lithuanian community. Since 1994, he served on the Advisory Board of the Lithuanian Embassy in the US. Algimantas Gečys has authored many scientific articles and collaborated in the Lithuanian press. For his merits to Lithuania, Algimantas Gečys was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas and the Medal of the Lithuanian Seimas.



The Lithuanian American Community President Algimantas S. Gečys (on the left) and Vice President Rimantas Česonis (on the right) met the US ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young to discuss Lithuania's independence and human rights. Photo by Max Machol



The Seventh National Executive Committee of the Lithuanian American Community. Seated from the left: Secretary Antanas Gailiušis, President Juozas Gaila, Executive Vice President Balys Raugas, Treasurer Petras Mitalas. Standing from the left: Vice President Vytautas Maciūnas, Chairman of the Public Affairs Council Algimantas S. Gečys; Vice President Aušra Mačiulaitytė-Zerr, and Vice President Rimas Česonis.



The Lithuanian American Community members with Congressman Charles Dougherty, who in 1979 introduced a bill authorizing continuing appropriations for the Lithuania legation to ensure its continuity. From the left: Aušra Mačiulaitytė-Zerr, Charles Zerr, Rimantas Stirbys, Dalia Jakienė, Algimantas S. Gečys; seating in the front is Congressman Dougherty. Photo courtesy: R. Stirbys



The US Delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission Chairman Michael Novak is being presented with a memorandum. From the left: Michael Novak, Algimantas S. Gečys, and Vytautas Kamantas



Algimantas S. Gečys met with US Vice President Walter Mondale at the White House. On the left: VLIK President Kęstutis Valiūnas.



Algimantas S. Gečys met President of the United States Jimmy Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale at the White House.



US Vice President Gerald R. Ford met with the Lithuanian American Community National Executive Committee delegation in the White House on February 11, 1974. From the left: Dr. A. W. Novasaitis, Rimas Česonis, Algimantas Gureckas, US Vice President Gerald R. Ford, Aušra Zerr, and Algimantas S. Gečys. Photo by Juozas Gaila.



The Lithuanian American Community banquet in Washington, DC in 1977. From the left: Algimantas Gureckas, Algimantas S. Gečys, Ethnic Affairs Deputy Advisor Victoria Mongiardo, Simas Kudirka, a US State Department official, and Rimas Česonis.



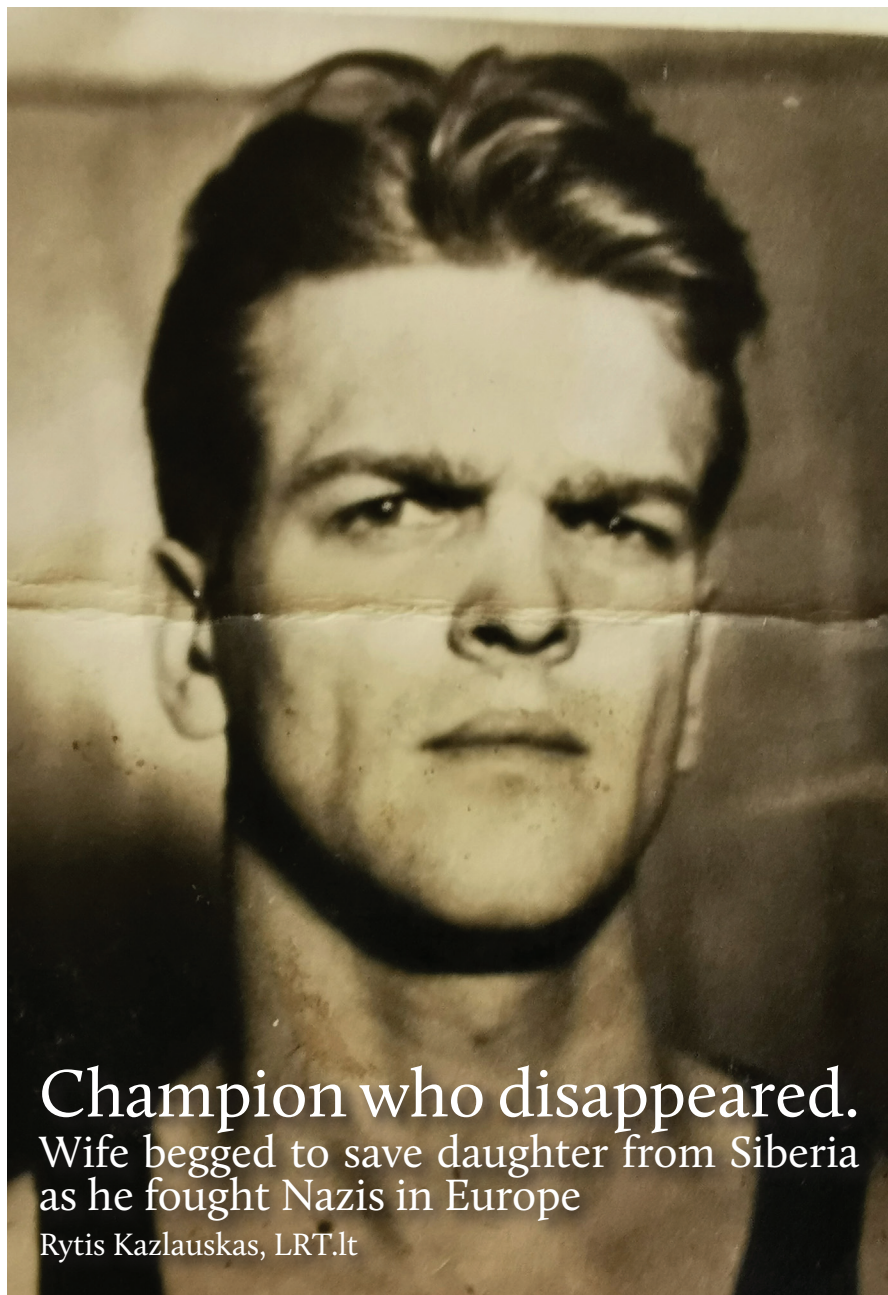
On June 13, 1978, the Lithuanian American Community delegation met with US President Jimmy Carter and US Vice President Walter F. Mondale. From the left: US Vice President Walter F. Mondale, the Lithuanian American Community National Vice President Rimas Česonis, Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid representative Fr. Casimir Pugevičius, the Lithuanian American Community President Algimantas S. Gečys, the World Lithuanian Community President Bronius Nainys, US President Jimmy Carter, Lithuanian Institute representative Dr. Tomas Remeikis, the Lithuanian American Community representative in Washington, DC Algimantas Gureckas, the Voice of America representative Jolanta Raslavičiūtė, and the Latvian American Community representative Olgerts Pavlovskis. In the second row: Estonian American Community representative Maido Kari, VLIK President Dr. Kęstutis Valiūnas, and the Youth Association representative Viktoras Nakas.



At the Lithuanian American Community annual session in October 1980. From the left: Bronius Nainys, guest from Washington, DC S. Murphy, Rimas Česonis, the Ethnic Affairs Advisor Dr. Stephen Aiello, Ethnic Affairs Deputy Advisor Victoria Mongiardo, the Lithuanian American Community Social Affairs Council Chairman Algimantas S. Gečys, BALF President Maria Rudis, and Vladas Šakalys, a dissident who fled occupied Lithuania. Photo by Jonas Kuprys.



Leaders of Lithuanian organizations pledge to work together to support Lithuania's efforts to join NATO. From the left: John Mankas, Vice President of the Knights of Lithuania; Algimantas S. Gečys, President of the Lithuanian American Community; Ambassador of Lithuania Vygaudas Ušackas; Saulius Kuprys, President of the Lithuanian American Council; and Jonas Urbonas, President of the Lithuanian American Republican National Federation. March 11, 2001. Photo courtesy: Teresė Gečys



Champion who disappeared. Wife begged to save daughter from Siberia as he fought Nazis in Europe

Rytis Kazlauskas, LRT.lt

Mykolas Ruzgys/Personal photo archives

American-Lithuanian basketball player Mykolas Ruzgys spent almost two years in Lithuania. During this time, he became a European champion and married his first wife, Danutė. But as the Second World War dawned, the family's misfortunes began.

The Soviet occupation in Lithuania forced Ruzgys to leave his family and go back to the United States. While he became a successful basketball coach in Western Europe, his loved ones suffered repressions in occupied Lithuania.

Here is the second part of the tragic life story of Mykolas Ruzgys, an American-Lithuanian basketball player and a European champion.

Military service and life in France

The first story in the series talked about Ruzgys' return to the US after the Red Army entered and occupied Lithuania on June 15, 1940.

Until the very minute he had to board a train and leave Lithuania, Ruzgys hoped that he could take his pregnant wife Danutė Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė along. However, the occupational government complicated her departure.

American citizens could freely escape occupied Lithuania, with the US embassy in Kaunas covering their travel expenses. Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė also talked to various institutions, but she was not allowed to leave, even though her newborn daughter was entitled to American citizenship.

Hopeless, the woman returned to her parents' house in Girelė village near Šiauliai.

In 1941, when the Nazis captured Lithuania from the Soviets, Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė was appointed to work as an English teacher in Telšiai. Two years later, she came back to Šiauliai and worked at a girls' school.

There isn't much information about Ruzgys' life after his return to the US. It is known that, for some time, he worked at a company called New York Life Insurance.

Documents found at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago revealed that Ruzgys started his service in the US military on October 31, 1942. On the service card, he noted that he was married to Dana Anna Ruzgis.

Ruzgys' division was transferred to Europe on January 21, 1945. They crossed the Rhine and moved deeper into Germany that was getting closer to capitulation. He also took part in the liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camp in April 1945.

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, but Ruzgys remained on the active US army list until February 26,

1946. After the war, the athlete settled in France and started coaching its national basketball team.

Many French basketball professionals died or were injured in the war, while those who survived were not focused on sports anymore. Therefore, the American-Lithuanian player contributed to the resurrection of the game that had been forgotten during the war.

Wife's struggles in Lithuania

Ruzgys and his wife Danutė were exchanging letters for some time, but their correspondence was monitored by the Soviet secret services. The regime saw an opportunity – they tried to use Ruzgys' family in Lithuania to entice him to coach the Soviet national basketball team.

The athlete's wife found out about this offer much later from a letter sent by Leonas Baltrušas, a 1939 European champion and Ruzgys' teammate. Danutė's sister, Laimutė, remembered the story.

"My sister was trying to go to the US and was sending letters to various institutions," the woman said. "Then, the Soviets decided to contact Ruzgys with an offer to come and train Russian basketball players in Moscow. He was promised an apartment and an opportunity to live with his wife and daughter."

"Baltrušas later told Danutė that Ruzgys did not accept the offer, saying 'I will not go to the country of criminals,'" she added.

Later, Danutė was punished for her connections with Ruzgys, who refused to work for the Soviets. The woman was pressured to renounce her marriage and was threatened to be left jobless.

In 1988, during the Perestroika period in the Soviet Union, Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė received permission to go to Australia, where she participated in a sports veterans' event. The travel request submitted to the KGB, now located in Lithuania's archives, revealed some interesting details.

"Vitartaitė's ex-husband Ruzgys Mykolas Mikalovič lived in Lithuania in 1938–1940 and left for the US in



Danutė Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė (second on the left)/Personal photo archives



American troops in Belgium/AP

1940. He was declared missing in 1953, and the couple was divorced," the KGB document said.

After the war, Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė's life was complicated. She moved to Vilnius in 1948 and worked as a physical education teacher at the Žalgiris sports association. Her daughter Lidija became deaf after falling out of a cradle as a baby. Every Monday, her mother would take her to a boarding school for the deaf, where she stayed until the weekend.

Ruzgys' wife recalled this period in a 1997 interview with the daily Lietuvos Žinios.

"Life wasn't successful. Mykolas left. I was alone with the baby. My husband was sending letters, inviting me to



Mykolas Ruzgys (first on the right) in western Europe after the war/Personal photo archives



Danutė Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė in Australia with the 1939 European champion, Leonas Baltrūnas/Personal photo archives

come [to the US], but we were not allowed to leave. Soviet secret agencies were constantly following us," she said.

"Little Lidija accidentally hit her head. She became deaf and lost her speech. My parents helped me raise the child, but they were deported. I did not have a normal job for a long time," the woman added.

Deportation to Siberia

Laimutė Vitartaitė-Poželienė recalled more details about the exile to Siberia that her sister mentioned in the interview.

In March 1949, Lidija, who was eight years old at the time, visited her grandparents and teenage Laimutė in

Girelė village where they lived.

One evening, their neighbor Stasys informed the family that they would soon be deported to Siberia. Laimutė's father could not understand why the Soviets wanted to deport him, as he was only a small farmer.

Nevertheless, the Soviets came for the family three days after the mysterious message from Stasys. According to Vitartaitė-Poželienė, their connection to Ruzgys had nothing to do with the family's deportation.

She said that her father had a sister whose husband was a drunkard and collaborated with the Soviets. He was jealous of Vitartai, who were successful farmers, and decided to slander them as supporters of Lithuanian freedom fighters, exposing them to deportation.

The Soviet soldiers that showed up at the family's door allowed them to pack all the necessary things, as well as some food for the trip. The Vitartai, along with their daughter Laimutė and granddaughter Lidija, were then put in a truck that brought them to Šiauliai railway station.

There, it turned out that Lidija was not on the list of deportees. But the family could not get in touch with her mother, who was in Vilnius and did not want to leave the girl to strangers. Her grandmother begged the soldiers not to separate the family. Eventually, they allowed the girl to travel together.

The family spent a month in a train car used for animal cargo before they reached their destination – Alzamay town in the Siberian Irkutsk province.

Danutė, who stayed in Vilnius, had to be informed about her family's deportation. The way she found out about it sounds like an excerpt from a movie.

"We were in the carriage. Dad told me to find a piece of paper and a pencil. I wrote a letter addressed to Danutė and threw it through the window as we were passing Vilnius," the sister said. "That piece of paper was found by a good person and delivered to Danutė."

Later, Danutė told her family about the shock she experienced when a stranger passed her the letter with a note about her relatives' deportation. She immediately went

to Girelė village, where she found out that it was true.

Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė used her status as an accomplished sportswoman to bring her family back. At first, she contacted the head of the Sports Committee. He advised the woman to talk to Justas Paleckis, the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR whom she knew.

In his office, Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė fell on her knees and begged Paleckis to save her relatives. The chairman promised to resolve the issue, and soon the family received permission to return.

A dossier found at the Lithuanian Special Archive confirms that four members of the Vitartai family were deported to Siberia on March 25, 1949. The file says that they were released on June 3, after Danutė Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė's request was granted.

"If it weren't for Lidija, we would not have been saved," the sister said.

Unexpected acquaintance

While his family was facing deportation, Ruzgys was starting his career in Western Europe. In 1950, the American-Lithuanian newspaper *Draugas* (Friend) ran an article about Ruzgys' success in France.

"After the war, demobilized Ruzgys settled in Paris. He advocated for a much slower and thought-through basketball technique," the article wrote.

"By organizing courses and lectures in a number of French cities, producing leaflets on this modern technique, and demonstrating his skills in movies, he helped bring French basketball to a new level," it added.

Except for this publication, there was not much information about Ruzgys' life in Western Europe. But as I was considering wrapping up the investigation, the story suddenly picked up again.

At the beginning of my research, I sent dozens of Facebook messages to Lithuanian communities in the US, asking if they knew anything about Ruzgys. After some time, I received a response from the Lithuanian community in Chicago.

"You could try looking into the internet forum where people are looking for relatives. Somebody was looking for a person called Michel Ruzgis," the message said.

The link attached to the response led to the Little Lithuania website. But the query about Ruzgys was written 15 years ago, which was not very promising.



The family of Laimutė Vitartaitė-Poželienė/Personal photo archives



Lidija Ruzgytė/Personal photo archives

However, I decided to search for the person who posted the message on the forum. A Google search directed me to the Swiss phone book, which gave a phone number.

I called the number. An English-speaking woman who answered the phone was suspicious and thought I was a scammer. Only after telling her everything I knew about Ruzgys did I earn her trust.

"Yes, Ruzgys left Spain and came back to the US. His family hadn't heard from him since," the woman said finally.

"Are you talking about his family in Lithuania?" I asked.

"No. Mykolas Ruzgys had a family in Spain," she replied. "He is the father of my husband."

Sonata Kazimieraitienė:

Master ceramist who inspires everyone to find an artist in themselves

Kipras Tarela



Sonata Kazimieraitienė is a clay mosaic artist working currently in both Florida and Chicago. She studied graphic design at the Vilnius Academy of Arts and has an MBA in Marketing for which she came to America in 2000. Before working as a clay artist in the U.S. she was a manager and director for manufacturers and advertisement agencies in which she directed graphic presentations. In this interview, we discussed her story of getting involved in the clay scene in America and the unique ways in which she likes to involve the community in her art.

Kipras Tarela: When did you feel in your life that art was where your home was?

Sonata Kazimieraitienė: From a very early age I was an artistic child, and I was lucky that my parents allowed me to develop my artistic skills and capabilities from a very early age. They encouraged me to dream that I will be an artist when I grow up. I just didn't know what type of artist I was going to be. There are so many different mediums and so many different ways to be a visual artist but I didn't know which technique, material, or field I would use. I went to an art school in Vilnius, Vilnius Academy of Arts, and studied design there. The studies were very broad. We covered graphic, industrial, and

interior design and this allowed me and my classmates to experience different areas of design. When we graduated we all started work in different fields. Some of us did interior design, others did jewelry, and I went into graphic design. In Lithuania, I worked in an advertising agency as a graphic designer. A couple of years later I went to work for a manufacturer in their marketing and advertising department and also managed promotions and advertising. I was in charge of all the printed materials and all the graphic presentation that you would see on the labels, all printed materials, packaging, etc. We would hire an artist but I would be the one suggesting ideas and directing. I was not directly involved in the designing but I was part of the decision-making group.

It was a combination, I had some marketing responsibilities there so I decided to get my MBA in marketing and that's how I came to the United States.

KT: That was your reason for coming to America then, education?

SK: Correct, and while I was here I started working with clay. It was in the winter of 2000. There was an artist in residence, Corrine Peterson, at my son's school (he was in elementary school at the time) and she was doing a ceramic mural with the students. She invited parents to come and help with this mural. It was a permanent artwork that she left after the residency. I was involved with it, and that was probably the first opportunity that I had to work with clay. I liked it right away and I started taking classes with that very same artist, Corrine Peterson. She was very important in my career. She became my teacher and then after a few years she hired me as her assistant.

KT: You would say it's very important to have supportive people around you at all times, and for you, when you came to the country, it was Corrine.

SK: Yes, I would agree. That was my lucky ticket I would say. I keep saying that if it would have been any other person. If I met any other person in the same circumstances, I don't think I would have been taken down the same path that I was taken down by her. It was a perfect combination, and I think what contributed to that was that Corrine became an artist when she was in her fifties. Before that, she was a housewife until her three children left the home. She was just a stay at home mom and she was raising them with her husband. When the kids left she had this urge; all her life she had this urge to do something artistic but she was afraid. She never had any training. I believe she went to school for psycho-therapy and after the kids left she started working. During her training, they were studying dreams, she started dreaming about clay. Then the person she was working with suggested taking classes with clay to see how it goes. So it was her story that was inspirational for me. You shouldn't be waiting your whole life to do what you want to do.

In my case I was already training to be an artist, I just had to, in my case, choose if I wanted to abandon this



From the left: Corinne Peterson and Sonata Kazimieraitienė

idea and be more 'practical' and start looking for jobs that would be more secure, would make me more secure. I said to Corrine that I could not do this anymore and I had to start looking for a real job because I had to raise children. Then she told me that her biggest regret in life was that she was waiting so long, that she didn't acknowledge her creativity and her wish to do art. For me, it was very important to hear that from her. Being a psychotherapist, a social worker, she was very careful with her words, she was very supportive and nurturing. A combination of those things made her a very important person in my life.

KT: She hired you as her assistant?

SK: Yes, it was in 2003 and I worked with her for several years as her assistant, and then gradually we became co-lead artists on a few projects. Eventually, I became more independent and I began getting my own commissions.

KT: So you two eventually branched off from each other after some time?

SK: Corrine is thirty years older than I am. When I met her twenty years ago she was in her sixties, and the reason she hired me as an assistant was that it was becoming physically too hard for her to take on projects on her own. Clay is a heavy material and you need a lot of physical strength to carry 50-pound boxes of clay or to load and unload kilns. It's very labor-intensive. That's one



Artist team working with Sonata Kazimieraitienė in Pompano Beach, Florida

of the reasons you'd need somebody to help along with all the other things. Then gradually she decided that she didn't want to be doing those large, public-scale installations. She wanted to focus on her personal and individual work. She was taking steps back, and I began taking over those larger projects. However, things were developing in a natural way, and we're still very close friends. She's in her eighties now and she's still active and working in her studio. For years, we had studios together. There's a very big clay art center in Chicago called Little Street Art Center. It's one of the biggest clay/ceramics teaching facilities in the Midwest. It's a large three-storied building and one of the stories is just for classes, for students. Even adults are signing up for classes. The second floor is just for art studios where we're renting the space from the center. There's a small community of artists there that I

was a part of for years. Corrine and I had studios there next to each other and continued to work and collaborate there.

KT: What are some of your more recent collaborations that you've done? I know about the one going on in Pompano Beach, the bee trail, can you talk about that one and any others you're working on?

SK: Since 2017 I've been working in Florida, I have a contract with the City of Pompano Beach to create five public art installations. All of them are mosaics and each has different mediums. One of them is glass mosaic, another is ceramic tile, yet another is hand-made ceramic. Now we're working on the fifth one. I consider it a big achievement for me to receive that commission. I participated in a large call for artists, a national call, and I was selected as a finalist. After presenting my ideas to the city's public art commission I was selected. The other interesting part about this project is that I'm working with five local apprentices. This was part of the contract as the city wanted a master artist to come and run this program. We called it a mosaic team, and teach other younger artists how to create large public-scale art installations.

KT: So part of this program was to involve younger artists, developing artists.

SK: Maybe not younger in age but they are artistic people who've never had the opportunity to develop their skills to the professional level. They all have day jobs or some of them are retired but they have those artistic ambitions and are interested in applying their skills. They had been artistic for their whole life but they never had the chance to apply it to something more permanent, and visible to the public. So when they received that opportunity they were very excited and motivated. It was a very pleasant experience for me too to be able to work with people who were very interested and dedicated, happy to be a part of the project.

Whenever I work in schools students are always inter-

ested because it's something different than just regular school work. It's a new person and a new project that they don't really know about and then at the end, they see this permanent installation on the wall and that makes them very happy. I've worked at the Palos Hills Library. It probably has five or six of my murals. I've been collaborating with them since 2010. Every couple of years we create a mural and the idea is to invite the community to come through workshops. People are invited to create individual pieces that become permanent. That creates such a great response from the community. We go back and see art that's been done by children who are now either teenagers or even grownups. That has value to people. They were able to leave their imprint, and it's rewarding to them. I think that's valuable when people see not just the finished work, but when they are involved in the process. I feel like when I'm working that way that I'm educating people and giving them an opportunity to experience their creativity. That's where I see the value. When people recognize that they are creative and that they can do something that becomes part of this large artwork they appreciate it more, they see it differently than if they would see just some finished piece by another artist. Through all those years I saw a lot of people who were so uncertain that they could create anything. You know clay is such a simple material, I would give them some samples or examples or I would make a demo and they could just follow my directions. They start making their own improvisations and you can see how people become less afraid. There were situations where parents would bring their children to the workshop and I would offer a whole family the opportunity to make something and the adults would be hesitant. They would say "Oh I don't remember" or "I'm not creative" and next thing you know, the kids are already finished and they want to leave, and the parents are still

working on their piece and they're so excited! I mean they surprise themselves because they don't expect it to be so much fun. You just show people that being artistic is not some special quality that only a few people are given. I



"The Community" at the Charlotte J. Burrie Community Center
 This is one of five public art murals for Pompano Beach that was created with five apprentices. The design is based on the idea that each individual is a universe itself and is represented as a small circular shape. Those individuals organize in larger circles and form the communities which affect each other through the "ripple effect".



"The Sense of Place" at the Linn County Community Services Department Sonata had applied to the national call for artists, and was selected from 700 applicants to create the mosaic during 3 months of residency in Cedar Rapids, IA in 2011. The mosaic represents an aerial view of Linn County surrounded by Iowa's landscape (cornfields, farms, windmills). Each 6"x6" tile represents 1 sq mile of land and was made by different person during series of workshops. Most of the participants were individuals with disabilities from local daycare center. They were asked to depict favorite things or events of their life. This way the map became not only physical but an emotional representation of Linn County.

believe that everybody has artistic abilities but there's just a way in which the educational system doesn't encourage creativity. Other things are more important in school and people forget or maybe never have the chance to develop or explore their creativity. So that's a rewarding part to see how people enjoy it when they discover that they can create something out of clay.

KT: What inspires you to do what you do: Mosaics, ceramic work, everything you do with clay?

SK: When working with clay, usually unconsciously, I can see that I get a lot of inspiration from nature, natural surfaces, and textures. I like to see what happens when I'm working with clay because it's such an interest-

ing material. There are many different stages. Clay can be a liquid substance that you can pour into molds and create objects that way. Through the process of drying, it can turn into a very hard material, and you could carve it almost like wood or some other hard material. I like to explore all those options. All those different qualities of clay become inspirational to me: learning how the material can be treated and how it responds at different phases. Just playing with the material and seeing what possibilities there are, experimenting with it. That's what I like about clay. It's a very tactile material. You can use tools but there is a lot you can do with just your hands. So while I can't say that it's a direct inspiration, the material itself is very inspiring to me. I would say that nature is my main guide, I like observing, learning, and noticing it and trying to apply it to my work.

KT: We've talked about your career and about how you got started. Now I wanted to ask you about the industry and your professional life. Being a public artist who's been on the commission for quite a while, what are some of the difficult decisions that you have to make when you're working?

SK: The most difficult decision is to balance, I would say, between family and work. Being an artist and working for yourself, being self-employed you

don't have certain hours that you go to work and come back, then dedicate the rest of your time to your family. You basically work all the time, you don't count hours, you have to meet deadlines and be on a budget. I would say it requires discipline. There's no guarantee, so you have to be obsessed. Especially when you work at schools. I meet art teachers there. Some of them would admit to me that they never had the courage to work as independent, self-employed artists. They want to be sure that they are getting their next paycheck in two weeks, and I think that for me it was very challenging, that there's no job security, that you're always chasing the next project. You have to be able to balance. I remember there were years where Corrine would ask me, "How many projects do you

handle at once?" I started thinking and counting: One is where we're just discussing the possibility, another might be that I'm in the process of proposing a design, a third one I might already be in the process of making it, and another one I might have someone installing something for me. You have to have the ability to juggle everything. Again I don't believe this is anything extraordinary. I believe every job is the same way. I'm just saying that in the art world there's much less opportunity, there's much more competition to get a commission.

For example one of my first big commissions was in Iowa in 2011. At the same time, I also applied for Call for Artists. When they selected me I was already working on this project. Somebody told me there were 700 applicants for this national call. I was shocked because we didn't know it when we applied for that project. You expect maybe a hundred, maybe two but they never thought that seven hundred people applied. When I just started I didn't know what it would require. I just knew that I didn't want to do anything else, and I was putting on the line my whole well-being by not going and signing up for a nine-to-five job. It was a big risk, and I don't know if I could go back and do it again, knowing what it takes I don't know if I'd have the courage now. You do things, a lot of things, just taking risks without imagining the risk, and sometime later you look back and you think, "I don't know how I did that."

KT: What would be the biggest decision, the biggest balancing act that you've had to do between your professional life as an artist and your personal life?

SK: Probably what I mentioned before, the biggest decision is to commit to a lifestyle that has no certainty. You're depending on the next project. You don't necessarily know if it's coming or if you're going to get it. I wasn't at a point where it was dramatic, where I didn't have food on my table. My family was supportive and understanding, I had extra help from my parents with my children. It's very helpful when you have a deadline and you have to finish and install a project you work 18 hours per day if you need to. It's very helpful to have somebody to help with family and chores. I don't have any dramatic stories to tell, but it was one of the challenges, and people who are thinking about becoming artists will probably know that it's not one of the professions most parents want their children to pursue. One of the reasons is that there's no certainty. No stability. There are not that many success stories I would say. You can't survive on just being an artist, it's not an easy path.

KT: When you came to the United States as both an artist and as just an immigrant what were some of the difficul-

ties you had both living here and coming here for your MBA.

SK: The biggest challenge for me was the language barrier. I came thinking that I know the language because I was accepted into the school, I had to take an exam back in Lithuania and I considered that I knew the language because I could read, listen, and understand. However, I never had many opportunities to speak. It was shocking to me to speak and to realize that people were having a hard time understanding me. Psychologically, it was really very difficult. I was afraid to talk to people. I think that's what helped me was taking classes, working with Corrine, and clay. She was very understanding and very supportive, that's why I always say that art is another language. When you're working on something, you can express yourself through your work. In the beginning, the clay classes I was taking were my way of coping with a changed situation in my life. It was a cultural shock. When I came I was in my early thirties so I already was used to a certain lifestyle in Lithuania. I had a certain environment, a certain group of friends and when I came here I was by myself.

KT: What would you say to someone in your shoes? Either an aspiring artist or someone who's coming to the United States as an aspiring artist, which is even more difficult.

SK: Well I think I would just say the traditional thing: You have to, really, really want to do what you're doing. No matter what, you have to stick to it. There were situations where people were telling me, "Why are you doing it? Stop doing this. It's not going anywhere". I just didn't know anything else. I didn't want to do anything else. If you have the feeling that this is the only thing you want to do, you will get you through. If you're placed in a position where you have to choose to do other things to survive, it might delay your success. I can't say "Don't do other jobs." That would not be the right thing to say. But as long as you keep coming back, as long as you're putting everything else aside and doing what you want to do it will take you through, you will be rewarded. I truly believe that and I have seen those examples around me.

Sonata Kazimieraitienė created murals and mosaics for Eisenhower Public Library in Harwood Heights, IL, Roundout Elementary School in Highland Park, IL, Congress Park Elementary School, Evanston CTA, Devonshire Elementary School in Skokie, IL, Linn County Community Services, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Central Railway Station in Vilnius, Lithuania, Lithuanian Museum of Art, Green Hills Public Library, Westmoor Elementary School, and City of Pompano Beach, Florida.

The Graphic Design of Vincas Lukas - Part 2

Dr. Indrė Antanaitis-Jacobs

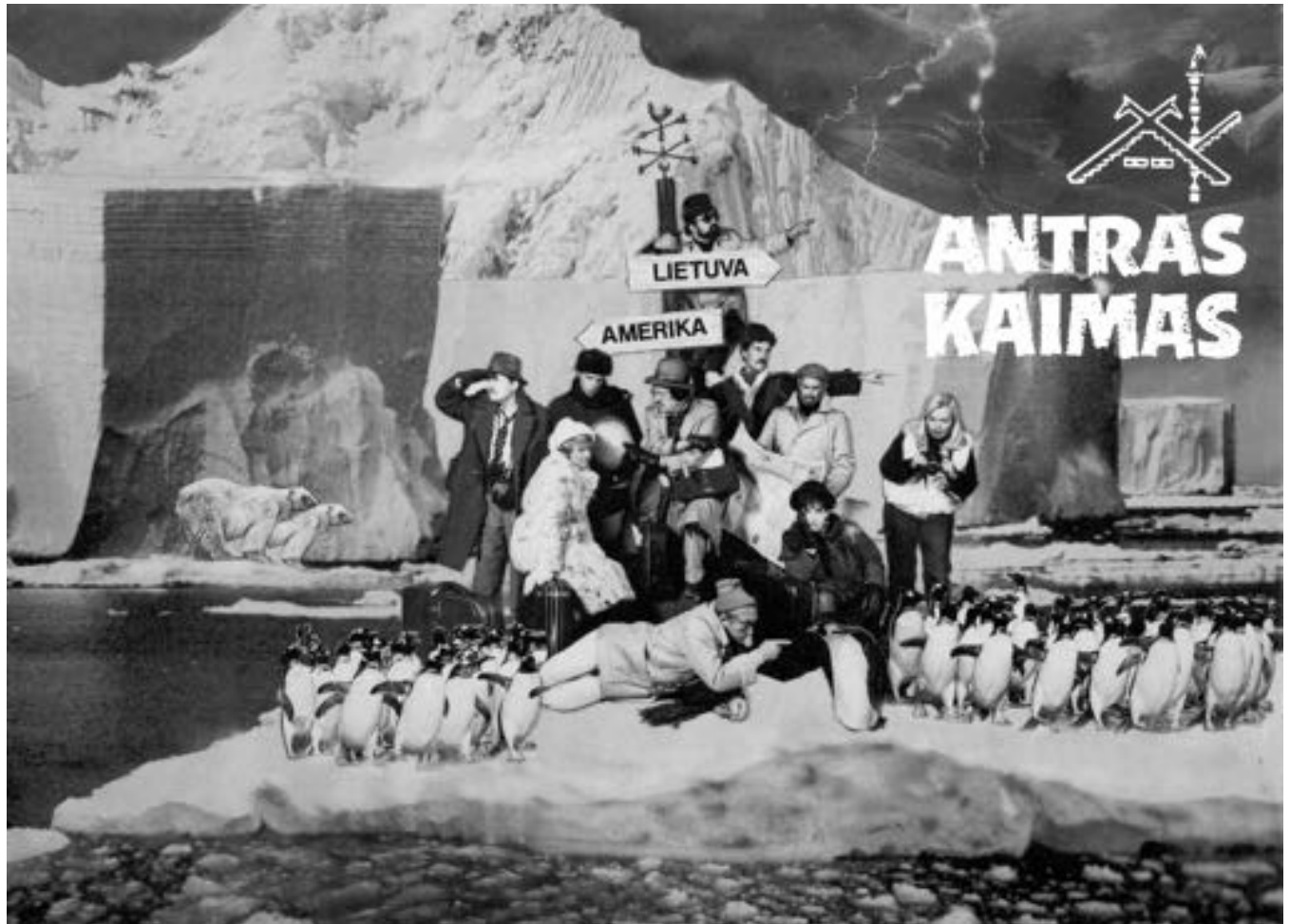


Photo 1

The Lithuanian Research Center (LRC) of Greater Chicago continues its October coverage of the abundant works of graphic designer Vincas Lukas, whose archive the Center received this past summer. Vincas Lukas has been designing graphic art for the American-Lithuanian community for several decades. Only a very small sample of his creative work is represented in this piece. Lukas's archive at the LRC reflects graphic design contributions to Lithuanian theatre, fine arts, opera; books and journals; logos and event scenes, and more.

Vincas Lukas essentially began his work in design for the Lithuanian community in tandem with joining the Lithuanian theatre satirical comedy group *Antras Kaimas*. Lukas designed all of the group's programs and posters. Photo 1 shows the program cover for the November 1989 performance in Lithuania; Lukas is in the front lying on the ground. Photo 2 is the program's cover for 1980. The photoshoot for this photo was done at the Community

Center Farm on Southwest Highway after Lukas received permission from the owner. Lukas got the idea for the 1985 program cover and poster for *Antras Kaimas* (Photo 3) while working with mannequins at his day job company's client – Sears. Lukas asked to borrow several Sears mannequins and took them to the Čiurlionis Art Gallery in Chicago, where he posed them and photographed them, then asked the *Antras Kaimas* actors to stand in similar poses, overlaying their heads onto the mannequins' bodies.

Over the course of eight years, Vincas Lukas and Vanda Alekna organized 80 exhibit openings and anniversary banquets at the Čiurlionis Art Gallery, and Lukas designed the gallery's posters, catalogs, and flyers. During the latter four of those years, 1984-1988, Lukas was Director of the Gallery. Pictured are Vincas Lukas, Vanda Alekna (the Gallery's previous Director), and Algis Putrius – the leadership of the Čiurlionis Art Gallery at the Gal-



Photo 2

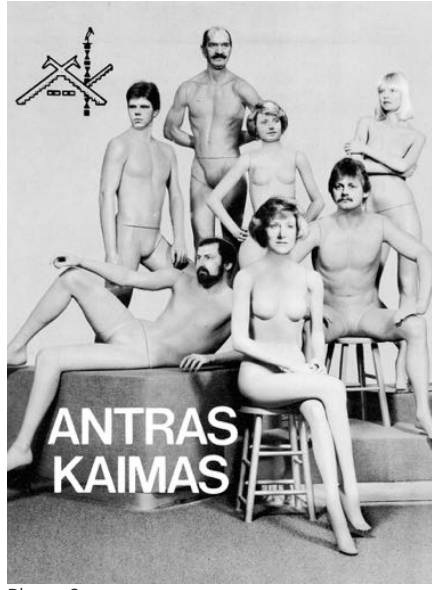


Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7

lery's 30-year anniversary celebration (see Photo 4, taken by Jonas Tamulaitis).

Among Lukas's earliest designs for the American-Lithuanian community in the 1970s was the program cover to the Kudirka-Kalanta Art Exhibit held at the Čiurlionis Art Gallery (see Photo 5). Romas Kalanta and Simas Kudirka were both symbols of the Lithuanian resistance to the Soviet regime in Lithuania from the 1970s onward. The Kudirka-Kalanta Art Exhibition invited artists to express the theme of their fight for freedom in a unified art exhibition.

Lukas was asked by Vytautas Radžius of the Lithuanian Opera of Chicago to design the opera's poster and cover

for their 25-year anniversary program, which featured Ponchielli's *I Lituani* (See Photo 6). Earlier, in 1976, Vincas Lukas designed the Lithuanian Opera of Chicago's poster and program cover for the US bicentennial's three one-act operas of *In the Land of Amber* by Gaidelis, *The Oath* by Marijošius, and *The Black Ship* by Kačinskas (See Photo 7). These latter posters were printed in both Lithuanian and English.

Lukas designed many book covers for Algimantas Kezys's authored books, like *The Realms of the Angels*, *Variations on a Theme: World Fairs of the Eighties*; *Chicago 2000*, *Faces of Two Worlds*, and more. Other book covers designed by Lukas include *Newberry Lituania* by Gie-

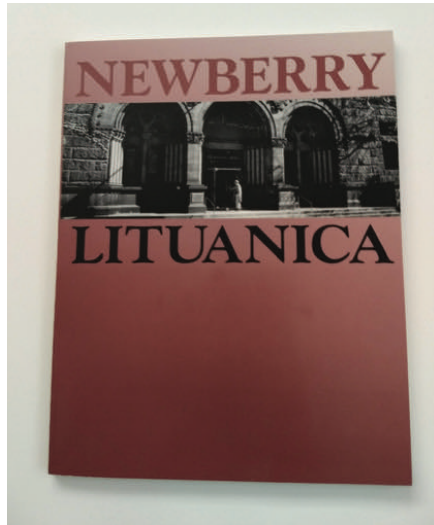


Photo 8

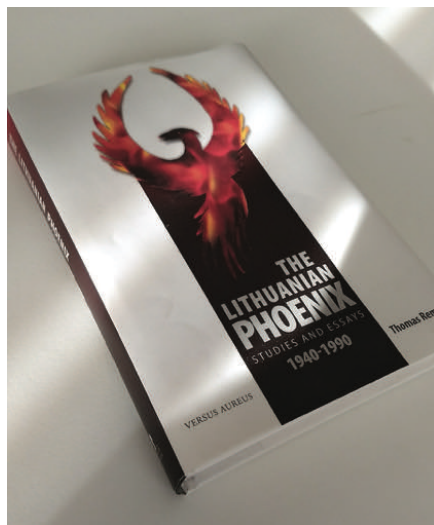


Photo 9



Photo 11

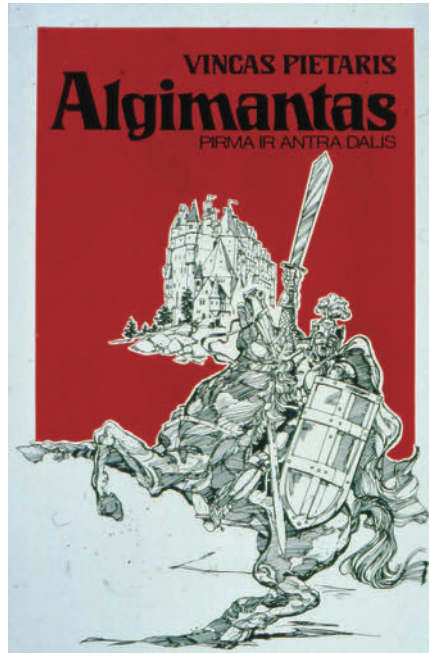


Photo 10



Photo 12



Photo 13

dra and Giedrius Subačius (Photo 8), *Phoenix Rising* by Thomas Remeikis (see Photo 9), as well as the cover for a reprinting of *Algimantas* (see Photo 10), the first historical novel in Lithuanian by Lithuanian national activist Vincas Pietaris, originally published in the US in 1904.

Lukas also designed for Lithuanian journals. He designed the new look for the *Lituanus* cover (Photo 11), and he put together the brochure as well as the art on stage for the 50-year anniversary celebration of *Laiškai lietuviams* at the Chicago Lithuanian Center (Jaunimo Centras) in 2000 (See Photos 12 and 13).

Racine Bakery on Archer Avenue in Chicago specializes in traditional Lithuanian and Polish bakery and

deli items. The bakery had its logo, bags, bread labels, the painting on the wall outside, and trucks designed by Lukas (see Photo 14). The logo of the affiliated Bake for Me! bakery and café on 43rd and Halsted in downtown Chicago was also designed by Vincas Lukas (see Photo 15).

ČLM (Čikagos Lituainistinė Mokykla) or the Lithuanian Cultural School of Chicago teaches Lithuanian culture to pre-school through high school students, including adult language classes on Saturdays on the South Side of Chicago. Vincas Lukas designed the ČLM logo (see Photo 16). He also designed the logo for the Darius and Girėnas Lithuanian School before it got incorporated into the Lithuanian Cultural School of Chicago, as well as created the logo for the Maironis School, the main Lithuanian school in the Chicago suburb of Lemont. Also pictured is Lukas's design for the Kriaučeliūnų Vardo Lietuvių Montessori Vaikų Nameliai logo, visible in the school window on 71st Street in Marquette Park (see Photo 17).

Photos 18 and 19 show Lukas's logo design of the Baltic Jesuits as well as graphics for their projects like "Tra-

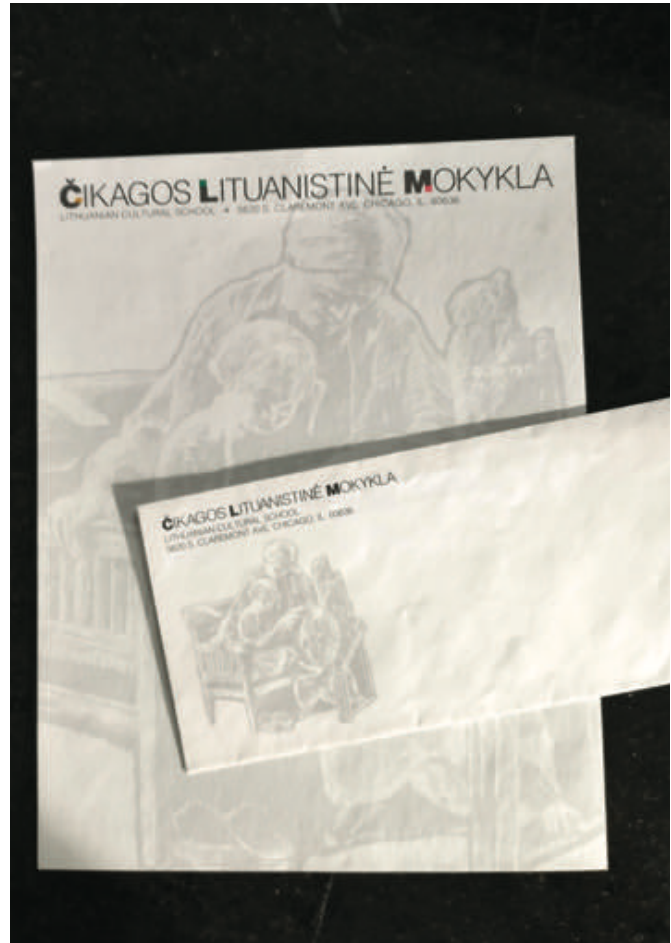


Photo 16



Photo 14



Photo 15

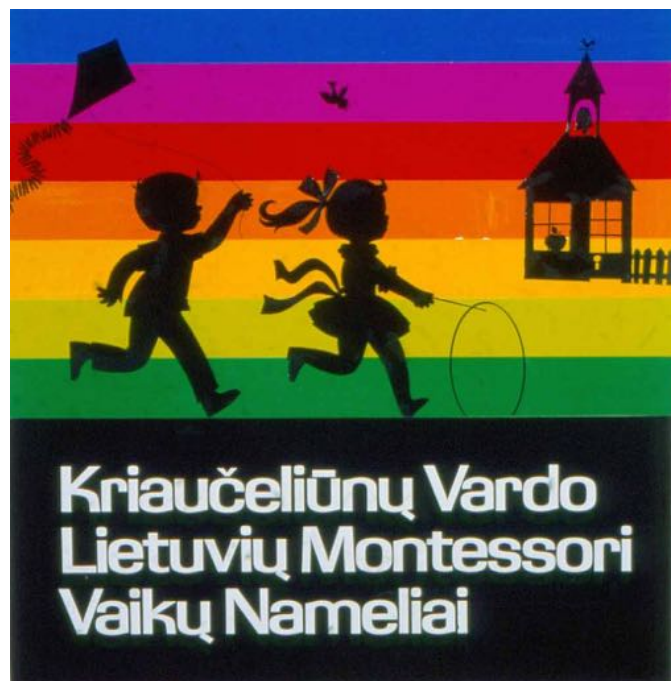
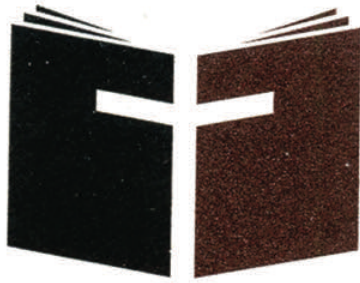


Photo 17



BALTIC JESUITS

Advancement Office
 2345 W. 56th Street
 Chicago, IL
 60636-1040
 USA

Photo 18



Photo 19



Photo 20



Photo 21

ditions for the Future” in the Baltic Jesuit Advancement Program, which serves to secure support for Jesuit programs and ideals in the Baltic Region.

Lukas had designed many posters for various World Lithuanian Community events like the World Lithuanian Days, Youth Congress, Cultural Congress, Sports Festival, and others. He also specially designed the trophies that were given to the President of Lithuania and to other dignitaries at the Tenth World Lithuanian Community

Congress in Vilnius in 2000 and designed the flag of the Congress that was raised outside, as well as the interior banners inside and on the tables. See Photo 20, the cover of the August 2000 issue of the *Pasaulio lietuvis* magazine, which shows the trophies.

In recent years, golf has become a more popular fundraising activity. Rimas Griškelis of the Lithuanian Foundation asked Lukas to design the brochure for the Golf Tournament benefiting the Lithuanian Foundation and

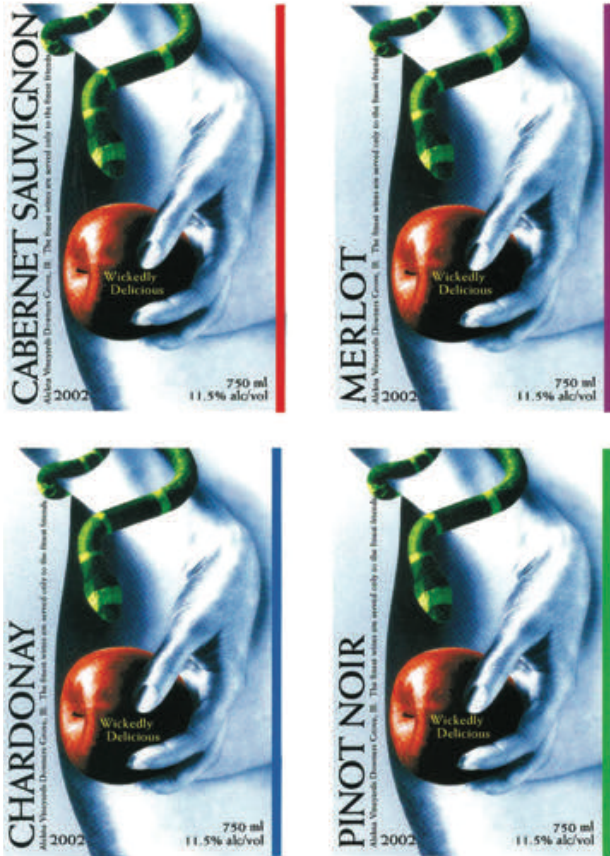


Photo 22



Photo 23

the Lithuanian World Center in 2010. (See Photo 21)
 Among more personal graphic art design contributions, Lukas designed five different sets of wine labels for Vanda Alekna's home-brewed wine over the years. (See Photos 22 and 23)
 Most recently, Vincas Lukas has been designing grave monuments. So far, he has designed eight monuments in three different cemeteries – St. Casimir's Catholic Cemetery, the Lithuanian National Cemetery in Chicago, and Saints Peter and Paul Cemetery in Grand Rapids, Michi-



Photo 24



Photo 25

gan. Represented here are two of the monuments, both at the St. Casimir's Cemetery (see Photos 24 and 25).
 The various graphic designs of Vincas Lukas are a vivid contribution to the history of the American-Lithuanian community. Indeed, they are a unique contribution to Lithuanian cultural heritage in general.

Photos by Vincas Lukas unless otherwise indicated

current events

Security

...The Lithuanian Defense Ministry has accepted a shipment of 142 Unimog U50005 trucks manufactured by Germany's Daimler AG under a 70 million euro contract signed in 2015. Lithuania acquired the trucks via NATO's Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA,) which saved 18 million euros. The Lithuanian Armed Forces now has 340 Unimog trucks and plans to add another 42. They are used for general tasks, logistical support, and personnel transportation.

...A mass rally in Belarus saw 200,000 marchers who were greeted by the OMON, Belarus' special-forces, who shot rubber bullets and stun grenades.

...With political unrest and COVID-19 in Belarus, it has closed its borders with Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine but has not closed its border with Russia.

...Lithuania's Cabinet approved a bid to host the proposed European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Center at the Vilnius TV Tower. Other candidates are Belgium, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, and Spain. The European Union-funded center is expected to be awarded later this year and be operating next year with an estimated 30-50 employees. Lithuania was instrumental in establishing the EU Cyber Rapid Response Force earlier this year.

...The Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, met with Lithuanian Chief of Defense, Lt. General Valdemaras Rupšys, to discuss the Center of Excellence for Energy Security and the need for a stable and reliable energy supply with diverse routes and suppliers, which will increase NATO's resilience against political and economic pressures. NATO is also expanding its ties with the International Energy Agency and the European Union on energy issues.

...The opposition party, the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HU-LCD) known as the "Conservatives," won the two-round Seimas election with 50 seats and began talks for a center-right coalition with the Liberal Movement (13 seats) and the Freedom Party (11 seats) which total 74 seats in the 141-seat Seimas. The outgoing Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LFGU) won 32 seats. Other seats are held by the Social Democratic Party (13 seats), the Labor Party (10 seats), the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania Christian Families Alliance (3 seats), and the Social Democratic Labor Party of Lithuania (SDLPL) (3 seats).

...Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius of the SDLPL, who held that position for the last eight years, lost his bid for a seat in the new Seimas as did Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis.

...The newly-established special constituency for Lithuanians living abroad selected Aušrinė Armonaitė, leader of the Freedom Party, with over 53% of the 12,900 votes.

...The new center-right Seimas coalition has selected Ingrida Šimonytė as its nominee for Prime Minister for appointment in November by President Gitanas Nausėda. Interestingly, she ran for President in May 2019 and came in second to Mr. Nausėda. She was the Deputy Chairman of the Bank of Lithuania (2013-2016) and former Lithuanian Minister of Finance (2009-2012) when she tackled the 14.7% drop in GDP during the Great Recession by instituting an austerity program. She has business and economics degrees from Vilnius University and lectures at its Institute of International Relations and Political Science; she also lectures on public finance at ISM University of Management and Economics. Euronews reports that she aims to accelerate the modernization of the Lithuanian economy from the current low-cost labor model to a higher value-added model. During the presidential campaign, she called for increased funding for national security and said that Russia is a "state that has broken all international agreements." She is in favor of increased relations with Poland, supports the Paris Agreement on climate change, and believes the U.S. withdrawal was a "mistake." In addition to speaking Lithuanian, she is fluent in English, Polish, and Russian and speaks some Swedish (the home language of most of Lithuania's banks).

...About 500 prominent Lithuanians and their family members were included in a database compiled by the open-source intelligence company, Zhenhua Data Information Technology, linked to the Chinese government and armed forces.

COVID-19

...In response to a large increase in COVID-19 cases, Lithuania has instituted a traffic-light scale with a mandated 14-day lockdown in 13 municipalities in the deemed "red" zones: Elektrėnai, Joniškis, Jurbarkas, Kelmė, Klaipėda, Kretinga, Marijampolė, Pasvalys, Plungė, Raseiniai, Skuodas, Šiauliai, and Švenčionys. Restrictions include limiting the number of passengers on public transport and banning gatherings of more than 5 non-family members in public spaces. State and municipal institutions are to move to teleworking; businesses should allocate 10

square meters per person being served; facemasks are mandatory for those over 6 in indoor public spaces and transport except when eating and drinking. The government also introduced the registration of participants in leisure and visitors to catering establishments to ensure traceability in case of infections. Areas that were deemed to be in a "yellow" zone, including Vilnius, Kaunas, Trakai, and Telšiai, were later moved into the red zone as their current COVID-19 numbers got worse and the October 25 runoff election passed. Many rural areas were in the "green" zone.

...Slovenian Foreign Minister, Anze Logar, visited Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and met with his counterparts plus Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and then tested positive for COVID-19. All contacts are now expected to observe a 14-day self-quarantine.

...Lithuania has launched a 1 billion euro business support fund to provide temporary support for its medium and large-sized enterprises affected by coronavirus.

...Toward the end of October, Lithuania counted about 1,000 COVID-19 cases and 8 deaths per day and is fast exceeding the country's hospital bed capacity, which is aggravated by a report that over 700 hospital personnel were infected.

...In early November, the COVID-19 death count reached 244 plus 91 infected people who died of other causes.

Business

...Lithuania's first "unicorn," Vinted, a billion-euro valued IPO, and Europe's largest second-hand fashion platform founded in 2008 in Vilnius, used some of its wealth to acquire United Wardrobe, a Dutch competitor, with business in Belgium, France, and Germany. The combined companies have 34 million users and a presence in Belgium, France, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the UK, and the US.

...The Three Seas Initiative is a Central and Eastern European effort to improve the infrastructure in a general north-south axis running from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Seas. It includes Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. A US delegation headed by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced an investment of \$300 million by the US Development Finance Corporation into the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. Poland pledged an additional 250 million euros into the fund bringing its capital base

to \$1.3 billion. The Initiative is an attempt to slow down the growing Chinese influence in the area via their east-west infrastructure projects known as the Belt and Road Initiative due to debt accumulated via various projects.

...EPAM Systems, an NYSE listed company headquartered in Newtown, PA, opened a new office in Vilnius and plans to hire 600 engineers within the next 5 years. The company provides product development, business consulting, and design services for clients in Financial Services, Business Information Systems, Life Sciences, Healthcare, Energy & Utilities, Automotive & Manufacturing and Insurance. It plans on collaborating with leading local universities and developing training and certification programs to help grow and upskill local students and IT professionals. Founded in 1993 with roots in Belarus and Princeton, NJ, EPAM has clients in 30 countries and 35,000 associates with revenue over \$2 billion. Partners include Adobe, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and SAP. For more information, see www.epam.com.

General

...Vytautas Magnus University has granted an honorary doctorate to Belarusian investigative reporter Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature. Her oral history books include *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Voices of Chernobyl* (1992), and *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013) of which David Remnick of *The New Yorker* writes, "The nonfiction volume that has done the most to deepen the emotional understanding of Russia during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union".

...OCCRP and its Lithuanian center, Siena.lt report that Kęstas Komskis, the former deputy speaker of the Seimas, has been charged with embezzlement and intentional bankruptcy of Agrolira, a construction company. Mr. Komskis is currently a council member of his home town of Pagėgiai.

...Divers and archaeologists have found the remains of a 16th-century soldier and his equipment in Lake Asveja, northeast of Vilnius while doing an underwater examination of the old Dubingiai Bridge. The largest lake in Lithuania was the site of Dubingiai Castle, which may explain the presence of the soldier who was recovered under a layer of mud and sand at a depth of 9 meters. The young man was found with a sword, helmet, two knives, and well-preserved leather boots. The castle was built to protect Vilnius from attacks from Livonia. The human remains are being examined at the Faculty of Medicine at Vilnius University.

Marija Čyvaitė

New President of the Lithuanian American Youth Association

By Kipras Tarela



Marija Čyvaitė

Marija Čyvaitė is the newly elected president of the Lithuanian American Youth Association, an organization dedicated to maintaining and preserving Lithuanian culture and heritage through today's youth. We spoke with her about her role as the president and the future of what she has planned for the group. What plans and solutions does the organization have to offer in these turbulent times? What are Marija's inspirations for the work that she does, and what philosophies inspire her? Here's what we learned.

Kipras Tarela: What is the Lithuanian American Youth Association, and what do you do? Can you give me a little history of the organization?

Marija Čyvaitė: I have only been involved in the Lithuanian American Youth Association for the last couple of years, and I think that it has had a very interesting history. When it started, its main purposes, its goals were a little more political. It was in the times when Lithuania was still occupied by the Soviet Union. A lot of the things that these Lithuanian youths would do would be lobbying on Capitol Hill or going to the Soviet embassies across the D.C. to protest the occupation and the Soviet Union-- to do all they could to get Lithuania free again.

Almost every other country that has a Lithuanian community (Australia, Argentina, Canada, England, etc.) has the LJS, typically, as a branch of the larger Lithuanian community in the country. In the U.S., our branch in Los Angeles has always been pretty active. The idea is that it's the overarching organization for Lithuanian youth, and ideally, every city or little community where Lithuanians live would have their own youth chapter. Los Angeles would have its chapter, and so would Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Omaha, Minneapolis, and others.

A big part of its work is to encourage young Lithuanians to be civically active in both their homelands -- in the U.S. and Lithuania. To pay attention to what's happening in the news, to vote in elections if you're able to. To stay up to date and active with Lithuanian-American relations. I know that for a while, the Lithuanian American Youth Association has been big on the professional development of youth. There have been quite a few events over the years. And especially these last few months with Covid, there have been a lot of webinars to help young people meet with older professionals and hear about how to apply for a job, the interview process, or how to talk about your "Lithuanianess."

To help make connections between Lithuanians -- that's a big personal goal of mine. I see so much value in maintaining and actively pursuing a broad network of Lithuanians of all professions and ages, of all backgrounds. I think the better it is, in terms of finding a job, growing professionally, and maintaining a connection with your Lithuanian community and the country. Networking and professional development are a big part of the Lithuanian American Youth Association. Part of building these connections is social, so I think it's a very good idea if many branches want to host something like a happy hour, or a Zoom meeting, to get to know each other.

KT: Are there any big events or projects that you organize?

MČ: There has been for the past few years one big event, and we call it the Lithuanian American Youth Association conference. In 2018 and 2019 it took place in Chicago. This year, it was virtual as everything else has been. It's the one chance every year that Lithuanians have to come together for a weekend and be with each other. In 2019, we did a bunch of small break-out sessions discussing different things, such as how to stay engaged in and

maintain a relationship with modern-day Lithuania, how to stay civically active, or how to apply for funding and scholarships in the Lithuanian community. We talked about opportunities to go to Lithuania through internships, working there, or just spending a summer there. Also in 2018 and 2019, we organized it to take place on the same weekend as the Lietuviu Fondo Balius, the Lithuanian Foundation's annual party. The Foundation is the primary financial supporting party of the Lithuanian American Youth Association. So on the night of the party, the youth got to meet with all those adults and the people who volunteer for the Lithuanian Foundation. I think it's a really good opportunity to network. I'm really big on networking.

In 2019, people came from Seattle, California, Omaha, Atlanta, Florida . . . all over. Some Canadians came, and we also invited a couple of Argentineans to come. I thought that it was a very smart move that we helped them to figure out a way to get there. There were two of them that came and they talked about their Lithuanian youth association. They showed a video of their conference that happens every year, and they invited us to attend. I believe, a group of 12 of us from the U.S. and Canada went to the Lithuanian-Argentinean Suvažiavimas in January, right before Covid hit. It's a good opportunity to pull people from across the country, and ideally, across the world, in for one weekend to talk about what's going on in the community.

Another thing, though it hasn't happened in the last few years, is that different cities' youth chapters will organize a New Year's party. I know a couple of years ago it was in Boston. It's another good chance for people to come together, some discussions, I know, can take place there, and of course, people then celebrate New Year's. We also encourage all to take part in all the other events and concerts, to participate in the Lithuanian song and dance festivals. So there's the one big event, a couple of smaller events, and then encouraging everyone to participate in their communities' events. We also encourage the local chapters to create their events and activities, helping them set up all of that.

KT: Are there any plans for any upcoming events besides the big yearly meeting?

MČ: The annual meeting happened a couple of weeks ago. We are soon meeting with the Canadian-Lithuanian Youth Association to do a more casual, social, and light-hearted event right before Christmas on Zoom. The new committee also has to meet just so that we can get our plans in line, and have the former committee pass on its knowledge and documents to us. We plan to con-



Marija Čyvaitė with Mantvydas Bekešius, Consul General of Lithuania in Chicago

tinue all those professional development events through Zoom, inviting older professional Lithuanians to share their expertise and their knowledge with the younger Lithuanians.

There's also a project in the works that ideally would become a yearly occurrence that we'd want to have with a different group every year. There's a Lithuanian man from the Portland area, and he is very interested in the old Lithuanian communities, and the old cemeteries and churches that are now abandoned. So, if you've heard of Mission Siberia or Misija Sibiras, it would be very similar to that, but in the U.S. The first year, 2021, would take place in Southern Illinois. We would go and clean up those cemeteries and mark those areas where Lithuanians lived, and learn about history. So that's a big project that's in the works.

KT: So it sounds kind of like a heritage site preservation project, is that right?

MČ: Right. And my big hope, and my big goal, is that it gives young Lithuanians a chance to learn about the history and establishment of the Lithuanian community in America, which starts about 150 years ago. And so these would be the sites of that first wave of immigrants who came in the late 1800s or early 1900s. It would be a chance to see those places up close. I would like to have books and articles that they could read to learn about and bring the history back to life and get these young people interested in the history of our Lithuanian community here.

KT: How did you get involved in the Lithuanian American Youth Association, and how can someone else interested get involved? What's your history with the organization?



Argentinean Lithuanian Youth Association congress in January of 2020

MČ: I think I'm a little lucky because I was born into a very active Lithuanian family, and I grew up in Chicago, which is like the central place for Lithuanians. I was so involved in everything my whole life, and it seems like it often tends to be those same 30, 50 people who are involved everywhere. So I saw a thing on Facebook for the Lithuanian American Youth Association annual meeting in 2019, and I saw that it was the same weekend as the Lietuvių Fondo Balius, which I was going to go to anyway because my dad is on their board. So I signed up for it and I got involved that way. As I said, it's a lot of the same people, so a lot of my friends were going anyway, and a lot of my friends were interested in it. It had a cool mission, so I quickly got involved with that.

I think it's easy to be involved with those things if you care a lot about maintaining an active relationship with other Lithuanians and being active in the community, and staying up to date on what's going on in modern-day Lithuania. As for all the other people who want to be involved, I would say reach out to our social media, our Facebook accounts, or Instagram accounts, to any of the people who are on the current board. The people on the new board are also very cool; they have a lot of geographical diversity. Just reach out to any of them, and just say you're interested in being involved, and then we'll find a way to get you involved.

I'm a firm believer that if there's a young person who wants to be active and do something, have a leadership role, then you should find something for them to do, or introduce them to people or organizations that they can go from there. So if there's someone who lives in an area where there's few Lithuanians, then they could write to us and we can say, "Oh, did you know there's a Lithuanian school not too far from where you live?" and put them in touch with a person from there, and then sud-

denly they're volunteering there, they're more involved, and so on. I would say, just reach out and don't hesitate to be active.

KT: What does it feel like to be the president of the organization now? What are some of the new responsibilities that you now have?

MČ: It hasn't fully sunk in yet, because I've only been elected about a week ago. We haven't had that turnover yet, so I haven't been given that piece of paper that tells me all my new responsibilities. But I'm excited. I'm looking forward to making the most out of these next two years. I'm excited about the new board and the new team.

I have made tons of connections over the past two years. A big part of that is because I was involved in Misija Sibiras, so I spent the last year traveling across the U.S. presenting about that. Like I've said, I've been to the Argentinean Suvažiavimas, and the Canadian one, so I have so many connections in my network and I see so much value in that. I want to help other people make connections like that too, and just expand their network, to get to know people from all over. I'm very excited, and I guess it's safe to say, a little intimidated, by the amount of work that has to be done. But I think we'll come up with a lot of good things.

KT: Are there going to be any changes for the Lithuanian American Youth Association now that you're the president?

MČ: One idea I had to get more people involved... So, we have our new board, which is like our core team, and we're going to be, as a sure thing, meeting monthly, if not biweekly/weekly. I'll be pushing them and seeing how much they can handle, and how often they're willing to meet.

So that's our core team who will be handling most of the advertising and brainstorming and so on. But I would like to have a second tier of Lithuanian youth all across the country who want to be more involved or are already more involved. I would like to meet with them quarterly, maybe even every other month, and just check in and see how things are going, see what people want to do in their communities, and what problems they are facing. To see if anyone needs help getting an event started, or if they need ideas for events or funding. To have my core team and a second-tier team. I'd like that because there were quite a few people who applied, and not everyone made it in, and I don't want to say no to those people. If they have a passion, if they want to be active, we're going to

find a way to get them involved. I plan to do a workshop very soon for young Lithuanian leaders. I have all sorts of ideas for discussions and things we'd do over that virtual weekend. I imagine that that would be a lot of those people, both from the board and from that second tier.

The Lithuanian language is very close to my heart, and living outside of Lithuania, it's super hard for us to maintain super clean and tight language skills. There are a lot of people who didn't speak it growing up, or just want to know it better. So that's something I want to figure out, and give people access to opportunities to learn or perfect their Lithuanian language, one of those being to set people up with someone from Lithuania that they could write back and forth to. One of my close friends works for the Lithuania overarching organization that oversees all youth groups in Lithuania. Something could be set up with her. Another thing would be to bring back athletic events. A lot of us were involved in sports festivities as kids, and I know that the adults have their basketball and volleyball leagues, but somehow the 18-30 age group doesn't have that, or no one takes initiative to do that. I think sports and athletics are such a universal thing -- it could bring a lot of people in. Though, of course, that depends on Covid.

KT: What are some of the changes/issues that have taken place, pertaining to the pandemic? What are some concerns you have for the future of the organization, again, relating to the pandemic?

MČ: There's no opportunity to meet in person, or that we're not allowed to meet in person. So I think people are missing that human interaction, and people want that chance to go somewhere and meet up with people. On the other hand, we're seeing a lot of young people take initiative and organize these online events. The UK Lithuanian Youth Association is awesome -- they're doing a lot of online events, and invite many other countries' youth groups to join. The Canadians have their monthly event online, and they always invite us as well.

I think this is the time to expand networks and get to know people because we can't play sports over Zoom, but we can discuss, talk, and have guest speakers. So, I'm choosing to see the positive side of this. Although, I think if we find ourselves in the same spot, talking over Zoom, next year, that's when I might start to get a little more worried. But I'm hopeful that maybe by next Fall we could all meet in person.

KT: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about yourself or the organization?

MČ: I think I have a lot of personal reasons for being involved in this, mainly that I love Lithuania and being a part of this community. I want other people to feel that, and it's one of those things where you either feel it or you don't. And if you don't feel it... It's so hard to explain to another person why it's so important to preserve and feel that relationship with Lithuania. I want young people to feel that in their lives. If we brought in new people into an event, and they left saying, "Wow, now I see why so many people put so much effort into maintaining this culture, this language." ... So, I think that that's a personal little admission that I have, to show people the value of maintaining that culture abroad.

I have a couple of personal philosophies that I always share with people. One of them is the idea of the seven generations, and the other is of the consumer vs producers. I'll start with the consumers vs producers. I think that in our community, we have the summer camps and the Saturday schools, the basketball, and the scouts -- and all that. When you're a kid, you're purely a consumer of everything that the community has to offer. You go there just because it's fun, because your friends are there, and because your parents tell you to go. You're just there as a kid, absorbing it all. And then, you get to the 18-30 age group, and you suddenly understand that you can't just consume -- otherwise, the community will die out. So I realized it at a young age, and I want to help other people realize it -- that it's our turn as the youth of our community. It's our time to be the producers, our turn to step into those shoes and roles. If you're 18 to 30 and you speak Lithuanian very well or have a passion for working with kids or teaching, try to get involved in the Saturday schools. Or if you've always been involved with the scouts, try to take a leadership community.

We're not kids anymore, and it's time for us to step up and be the ones who lead and run this community. Our parents and grandparents, and our great-grandparents, for that matter, did a great job maintaining this community. The fact that there are so many third and fourth generation Lithuanians who still care about their ethnic background, their heritage, and who still want to speak the language... If we don't want that to die out, it's our turn to step up, and the Lithuanian American Youth Association is there to be the stepping stone, to get people to go from consumers to producers in our community. I hope that our new board can provide opportunities for that.

The idea of the seven generations is that at any given point, there exist seven generations. You are the fourth generation, and then before you are your parents, grandparents, everyone before you. Then kids, grandkids, and everyone after you. The idea is -- you take everything

our community

that was given to you from the older generations, and you embrace it and work with it to make it your own. But, you make sure to pass it on -- it's your obligation to not only think of your children and your grandchildren but all the people who are not even born yet. It's a Native American concept, and I thought it was very similar to the Lithuanian community. I grew up with people always saying that this is such a gift, that you have to maintain this connection to Lithuania and pass it on to your kids. It's another thing that has guided me. Everything that I do is from this idea that this was passed on to me. People went through a lot of work to preserve this culture, and I want to pass that on to later generations.

On a final note, my parents were born in the U.S. and they grew up here, being active in the community. And everyone talks about how, before 1990, the only purpose of the Lithuanian community was to preserve the culture and language and help Lithuania become free again. Then, we met that goal in 1990, and then it was this weird time where some thought, "What's our new purpose? Why should we keep speaking the language if Lithuania is free and everything's fine? Let's just be American." I was never satisfied with that, and I think a lot of people still ask, "What's our purpose?"

I would say the purpose is... You can't ever say that everything is fine and safe and good now. Lithuania is not some fairytale world -- it's still a modern-day country that has real problems. Let's be so invested in it that we could do our part in helping that country grow and evolve, and



The Lithuanian American Youth Association congress in 2019

stay safe and the country that it is today. I want people to understand that just because you don't live in Lithuania doesn't mean you don't have value to it. Every Lithuanian is valuable to Lithuania.

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